

The James R. Clark House
Caledonia, New York

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PHOTOGRAPHS

DISTRICT OF NEW YORK-2

Historic American Buildings Survey
Walter H. Cassebeer, District Officer
84 Exchange Street, Rochester, N.Y.

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THE JAMES R. CLARK TAVELIN House
Caledonia, New York

Owner: James R. Clark

Date of Erection: 1827

Architect: Unknown

Builder: Unknown

Present Condition: Good

Number of Stories: Two

Materials of Construction: Stone

Other Existing Records: Town Records.

Additional Data: See following pages.

THE JAMES R. CLARK (TAVERN) House.
Caledonia, New York

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE.

At the request of Mr. H. A. Lawrence, in charge of this survey for the Department of the Interior, this sketch is submitted as a statement of the physical and historical features which in his opinion makes the building worthy of a place in the Historic American Buildings Survey. An essential feature he discovered in the fact that, with the exception of the changing of one minor partition, the building stands today as it was built.

Identity of the builder seems to have been lost to the memories of at least two generations. Three men over ninety now living, besides many others including kin of Clark who have spent their lives in the vicinity, have had no knowledge of who built the tavern. Although Clark moved elsewhere in the 1850's, and its use as a tavern ended about 1865, it is notably peculiar that the name of a man once prominent in the community should, in its annals, have been separated so completely from a piece of architecture which has for years attracted the attention and the inquiries of strangers, has been pictured in public prints, and must have occupied a prominent place in post-pioneer affairs.

LOCATION.

Not the least interesting fact, and one which directly connects this survey with the primitive period of its construction, is its location near one of Nature's unusual phenomena. At that time there existed across the highway a small lake said to have covered an area of nearly twenty acres, since largely drained and filled. This lake was fed by a number of springs of pure water bursting from the underlying limestone strata to form a stream sufficient to turn the wheels of early mills and which now provides ideal conditions for two trout hatcheries, one of them State owned.

Thus the name "Big Springs" appears on the earliest maps of the "Genesee Country. The Indian name was Can-o-o-di-ya,

while the early Scotch settlers called the lake and springs "Topermere". An early traveller commented on the beauty of the heavy undergrowth with occasional pine rising above it along the outlet, which in a measure still exists.

It can be truly said that Nature also determined the route of the chief highway across New York State, of which Big Springs was an outstanding landmark. For ages an Indian trail linked the tips of several of the "Finger Lakes" and then steered directly for these springs, which furnished an abundance of fish. When surveys began this trail was found with few deviations to be the most consistent route for a turnpike, over which moved the sleds and ox-carts of the pioneer settlers, later the covered wagons westward bound, and is now a three- and four-lane highway known as Route 5.

Upon the south side of this highway, known in early deeds as the Niagara Road, about seven miles west of the Genesee River, stands the subject of this survey. It is located in the Town and Village of Caledonia, which lies on the west bank of the Genesee River some eighteen miles south of the City of Rochester. It is built of dressed limestone quarries nearby and rests on a stratum of smooth rock about five feet below the surface which forms the cellar floor under the entire building. Several crevices in the rock afford a means of measuring the thickness of the stratum, which is found to be nine feet. Below is a stratum of gravel about 18 inches deep which forms a waterway, the water finding outlet in the springs, one of which was open in the highway and was a basis for surveys.

THE PERIOD OF BUILDING

Many small taverns lined the Niagara Road, in fact each new log cabin seems to have been open for the accommodation of travellers through the wilderness. Larger log houses built for the purpose were followed by frame houses of interesting architecture as saw mills multiplied. The innkeeper became a leading business man, inasmuch as he received much of the ready cash that percolated into the settlement. He was often a farmer as well, but the prohibitive cost of transporting farm products by wagon tended to reduce his agricultural pursuits to supplying the inn table.

The Clark tavern was one of the most pretentious within miles east and west. Yet the young Clark had arrived penniless only ten years before. What was the source of his income to be able to finance such an undertaking? He had kept another inn for

three years previous. Hence the inquiry more properly should be, What was the innkeeper's chief source of income? There are but two small sleeping rooms in the tavern under survey. Recorded tales of travellers indicate that this type of building was common. Hence the fees for lodgings could not have been of consequence. The tide of migration from east toward the north-central states was in full swing in the twenties, stage coaches passed the door, farmers made the tavern their meeting place. Apparently the retailing of the product of numerous small distilleries was item No. 1 in the income list, meals second. Transients must either have "slept out" in homes, or in their covered wagons, or, as one traveller relates, rolled up in their blankets and slept on the floor, men and women in rows.

During all the years from the first town meeting to the "inhabitants" in 1803 until the 1840's, the several inns were the only places of meeting in April and for elections in November. The Clark tavern was designated several times in the town record. The upper floor, of which three-fourths was in one room, divided only by two large open arches and having two fireplaces, must have been designed and used almost exclusively for balls. Another use which made this tavern a community center was the postoffice. The writer of a brief village history states that the mail was kept in a "closet off the barroom". When re-plastering the hallway the curiosity of the present owners was attracted by some short lath which, being removed, disclosed the wicket with its ink-stained lintel through which mail was passed in the thirties. It is framed and preserved.

Such seems to have been the purposes and uses of this and probably other taverns between 1820 and 1840 in this region. It may be commented that cattle drovers, of which there were many, used separate taverns supplied with corrals, and followed other roads when possible.

Passing to more recent years, Caledonia's first bank was opened in the living room in 1885, continuing until 1891, while the public library occupied rooms from 1883 to 1888.

DATE OF BUILDING AND TITLE

Not until the past Spring (1935) have the name of the builder and the probable date of building been established. The transcript of deeds, etc., in possession of present owners dates back to 1850. Records in the County Clerk's office of Livingston County date to 1821, when the county was set up. Consulting these, the writer found the necessary facts. By chance, however, he is able to present the entire line of succession of title. A

bundle of old deeds and other papers handed him by a lawyer as curios several years ago held no meaning until discovery this Spring of an early map in a box of surveyor's field notes returned from an older county a few years ago and now reposing in the county clerk's office. Lot numbers correspond. These two "chances" are source material. The line follows:

1803 (January 12) Deed from Sir William Fulteney, baronet, of Kent, England, by his attorney, Robert Troup, to Alexander McDonald, lot 22, containing 147.14 acres, bounded two sides by Niagara Road which makes an obtuse angle. Deed in possession of writer.

1814 (May 7) Deed of Alexander McDonald to Donald McDonald. This was a division of property. Deeds and contract in possession of writer.

A subdivision map in 1814 is referred to in many deeds and is much sought. Lot 22 contains important business property and a railroad right-of-way at present.

1827 (December 26) Deed of Donald McDonald and wife Abigail to James R. Clark, lot No. 4 of subdivision, consideration \$65. Liber 6, page 238, Livingston County Records.

1842 (May 10) James R. Clark and wife Belinda to William Hamilton of Brighton, consideration \$1958.74. Liber 26, p. 211.

1850 (May 14) William Hamilton and wife Jane to Robert Wilson, consideration \$850 (rear part of lot had been sold off). Abstract covers this and subsequent transfers.

1897 By will of Robert Wilson to Margaret Wilson, his wife.

1914 By inheritance to Earl Johnson, grandson.

1919 (June 12) Earl Johnson to Frank S. Williams.

1920 (March) Frank S. Williams and wife Leah to Frederick F. and Elisabeth F. Keith, present owners.

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As James R. Clark bought the property for \$65 and sold it for nearly \$2000 it is obvious that he must have built the tavern.

But there remains the date, which would have been between 1827 and 1842 his term of ownership.

For this date the Caledonia Town Clerk's record, running back to 1803, seems to offer a reasonable conclusion. In 1824 the town meeting was held "at the house of James R. Clark, inn-keeper". In 1826 the meeting adjourned to the House of James R. Clark for 1827. Both of these houses were of course previous to the purchase of the lot 4 property. Came the town meeting of 1827 and the minutes read, "met at the house formerly occupied by James R. Clark". Mr. Clark had evidently moved. The 1827 meeting adjourned to the "house now occupied by James R. Clark", which would suppose that Mr. Clark occupied new quarters in April, 1827, although the town meeting was not held there until April, 1828.

In spite of the fact that the lot 4 deed was dated December 26, 1827, it is a reasonable supposition that construction of the tavern was completed in March, 1827, perhaps well under way a year previous. Most farm land had been purchased by contract from the original owners pending the surveys and execution of deeds, hence Mr. Clark presumably followed that custom. A similar stone tavern nearby was under construction three years.

The present owners purchased the building much in need of repair and have found much pleasure in restoring its features. They hope this short sketch may be of benefit to some research.

The following biographical sketch is by Miss Boyd, great grandniece of Mr. Clark, a young lady of 25 years, who has given much time to her investigation. She and her mother and other living relatives are descended from Mrs. Melinda Place Clark, wife of James R. Clark, or rather from her brother.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JAMES R. CLARK - By Mary Elliott Boyd.

The following excerpt from a letter written by James R. Clark makes a vivid picture of adventure common to many young men of his day who sought new opportunities in the wild Genesee Country and to whose perseverance and judgment we owe much. It was written in 1879 to Mr. Robert M. Place, of Caledonia, a nephew (and grandfather of the writer):

"On the ninth day of October in the morning before it was yet light, in the year 1817, I being in the twentieth year of my age, I took what little clothing I had, without the knowledge

of my parents or any other members of my family or my neighbors, and with only a nine-cent shin-plaster, as they were called, it being soon after the War of 1812, I set out.

"The point before my mind's eye was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A lad some older than myself, who lived ten miles from my father's, helped make up the plan to 'light out' as the boys call it. Our agreement was to meet on Fort Miller Bridge a few miles east of where you were born, at an hour in the morning as early as practicable.

"We met on the bridge. Each of us had a knapsack, fixed the best way we could with things, and started on foot a distance of five hundred miles. We had each two or three loaves of bread (rye), which lasted us to Geneva. Nine miles west of Geneva, the road towards Pittsburgh turned to the left, and the one to Ohio kept straight on to the Buffalo road. I told my comrade before we got to the end of nine miles, I had altered my plans and thought I would keep on to Buffalo. En route to Buffalo, for want of money, I stopped at Caledonia.

"The first work I did in Caledonia was to help a British deserter dig a well on the then Chadwick farm (now owned by Mr. Clark's grand nephew). The next work I had was at a sawmill, about three miles from Caledonia. I soon wrote for my family and they joined me. The first house we lived in was one near your mother's (now occupied by Edwin A. Roberts). Later I returned to Saratoga county, whence I had come, and married your aunt. Her family was soon persuaded to come to Caledonia".

According to the town records, which date back to the first town meeting in 1803, Mr. Clark was very active in town affairs. Three years after his coming here he was elected a constable. He served as constable in 1820, 1823 and 1824. In 1821, 1822 and 1823 he served as collector. In later years, 1835, he was a pathmaster, while in 1836 and 1837 he was an overseer of highways. He was on the jury list in 1842.

One reads in the record that in 1824 the annual town meeting was held "in the house of James R. Clark, innkeeper". In 1827 the town meeting was adjourned to meet the first Tuesday in April, 1828, "in the house now occupied by James R. Clark." In 1827 there is record of Mr. Clark buying a lot for \$65. The price of the lot was so cheap one assumes there was no building on it. In 1828, we read, the meeting was held in the house of James R. Clark. So from these facts one can assume the house was built in the year 1827.

For several years Mr. Clark conducted this house as an inn. Here also in the East room was the postoffice where the rates were 6 to 24 cents per letter. The window of this post-office is preserved in the wall today.

In the late 1830's Mr. Clark ventured again, buying a railroad operated by horse-drawn cars on wooden rails which connected Caledonia with Scottsville and a loading pier on the banks of the Genesee river. Flour and gypsum were its chief freight. For two years it went well until a canal was built through Scottsville and near Caledonia. The railroad was planned to be extended farther west passing the Clark Tavern, so for a time it was called "railroad house".

In the 1850's Mr. Clark moved to Delphos, Ohio, having sold the tavern. In Delphos he owned the American House, where he remained in business several years.

Between this time and 1879 when he wrote the letters now in my possession to ^{his} nephew, we have no record of his activities and have been unsuccessful of late in obtaining any information about him. The letters and town records have been the sources of information for the above article. Our branch of the family and his have not been in contact for several years.

In a letter written in 1876 he says: "I have no relatives in the State (Ohio) except one grandson; and if living I suppose I have a great grand daughter in Batavia, your State" (New York). In 1879 he added this to a letter: "This was written by your uncle, James R. Clark, in the 82nd year of his age, and time admonishes it may be the last letter received by you from me."

Data Compiled by

F. F. Keith